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ABSTRACT

There are compelling reasons to use talk in the writing classroom to improve both expressive and expository writing. First, speaking is natural, and students come to the writing classroom linguistically well-developed and confident. Second, talking encourages exploration of words by slowing down the thought process without completely stopping it. Third, this naturalness and ease of speech establishes a comfortable atmosphere in which writers feel free to take risks in writing and in sharing their writing. Talking activities can be helpful during all three stages of the writing process. Prewriting activities include role-playing followed by free writing, or discussing an unusual object before writing about it. Questioning can be a very important activity during the drafting stage. As students begin editing or revising their papers, student-teacher conferences and peer revision can help make the students' communication clearer and more in tune to audience needs. Most important, students must both understand that talking about writing is necessary and observe teachers talking about writing to learn this fact. Once talking about writing becomes important to teachers it will become important to students as well. (HTH)

TALKING: THE NEGLECTED PART OF THE WRITING PROCESS

by

Louann Reid

On the wall of my classroom is an enlarged copy of a newspaper cartoon. The teacher is standing in front of the class saying, "All right, class, my job is to talk to you and your job is to listen. If you finish first, please let me know." The time has come in writing classes for kids to let us know that they have finished first. Even though there are strong reasons for using talk in the writing class, research and my experience in a variety of schools shows that talk is indeed the neglected part of the writing process.

As proof of this, think about the last time you got to school feeling just awful and decided to give an essay assignment so at least they would be working quietly. It is a very tempting idea and there may be occasional justification for it. Unfortunately, this procedure is too often the only procedure. Research backs this up.

In 1981, NCTE published results of Arthur N. Applebee's study of writing in ninth and eleventh grade classrooms in six subject areas. Through observations, teacher questionnaires and teacher and student interviews, Applebee assessed the writing that was occurring in schools nationwide. He found that most writing was informational--essay questions on tests, summaries of research or of learning the student had done during the term. Although more expressive and interpretive writing occurred in English classrooms than in others, there certainly did not seem to be a writing revolution occurring; seventy-five percent of the writing done in English class was informational, too. Most interesting to me, though, were the figures relating to talking about writing. An average of three minutes elapsed between the time the teacher assigned the topic and the time the students were expected to begin writing.

Thirty-seven percent of the teachers used some brainstorming before the assignment but only 11% reported using it regularly. Twenty-four percent of the English teachers used some kind of conference after the assignment was finished and five percent regularly used class time for students to read papers of other students. In terms of talk in the writing class, you would have to conclude with Applebee

> Discussion of the topic was rare; it usually took the form of teacher questions prompting brief student response. Rare too was any gathering and sorting of relevant information, whether through procedures such as brainstorming or through systematic reference work. Indeed, most assignments began with the expectation that the student already knew what to say and could rapidly begin to write.[1]

Research on composition tells us that the process he saw was not the best way to teach writing.

There are compelling reasons to use talk in the writing classroom to improve both expressive and expository writing. Today I would like to share with you some of those reasons and some of the techniques that other teachers and I have used to help students write more and like it better! But first a word about one of the other teachers. Tom Liner, who could not be here today, has worked in this area and has offered many suggestions from his years of teaching students in grades three through twelve.

Speaking is natural; writing is not. Students come to us linguistically well-developed and confident. Although all may not be willing to give a formal speech, all are perfectly capable of uttering complete, coherent messages. Building on this strength motivates much more powerfully than the traditional approach to writing instruction--"Write an essay on (blank) so I can see what you need to work on." Compare this error-centered approach to writing instruction with the praise-centered method by which most of us learn to speak. When a baby utters her first "ma-ma" or "da-da" it is the

greatest event in the world. Relatives are called and the clever child is encouraged to repeat the performance. We are willing to fill in information when children cannot put together whole sentences. "Wa-wa" is sufficient request for a drink of water. We don't say, "No, you may not have drink until you can say it correctly." Children play with sounds and words, discovering that some bring results and others do not. Through this kind of practice, children learn language. Then, why shouldn't they be encouraged to experiment with written language too? We know they are not, though. They learn early that writing must be in the lines and correct. They learn to hold their pencil just a certain way and to create penmanship that meets a certain standard.

Talking encourages this exploration of words by slowing down the thought process without stopping it completely. We've all felt the panic of having inspiration slip away while we take time to write as fast as we can. By talking to a sympathetic partner, we can test ideas, explore words, experiment with different methods of organization and not lose valuable thoughts. Talking and questioning also add meaning that may be omitted by a writer scribbling to save ideas. James Collins and others have found that one of the differences between basic writers and mature writers is that basic writers assume the reader knows as much about the subject as the writer does.[2] Talking throughout the process of prewriting, drafting and revising enriches the finished product without stunting its growth.

The naturalness and ease of speech lead to a third advantage--it establishes a comfortable atmosphere, one in which writers feel free to take risks in writing and in sharing their writing. When my sophomore English teacher, Mrs. Davenport, read aloud the model essays in the blue composition book, then supplemented her instruction with admonitions about punctuation and paragraphing from Warriner's before I had even written a word, I knew she had all the answers. My chance of writing an "A" composition was greatly

diminished in light of all this excellence; writing a character sketch seemed as impossible as climbing a mountain. Students do not write well under these conditions. Only the bravest or most foolhardy of students will risk revealing anything of themselves in an assignment doomed to failure and the rest will just crank out something to pass or will not even bother doing the assignment. Fortunately, the next year I had a teacher who knew that writing instruction had to be cooperative, who believed in listening to us, who discussed our writing and hers. This shift in approach from mountain to mentor must be made if our students are to feel comfrotable enough to experiment in their writing. Talking and listening can accomplish that. And they can do so at each stage of the writing process. You can see specific ways to do that in the activities I will hand out later. In addition, I want to share what Tom Liner has discovered in his observation of editing groups. He says that when you establish the editing habit and when kids get over the fear of reading aloud, good things happen. First, students talk about experiences about the work. They deal more with the background experience or content than with technique. This is not bad that they feel a need to continue to share the work by talking about it, but you do have to know this will happen and not conclude too early that they are just goofing off. The second thing he has discovered is that the teacher's actions are terribly important. Students model what the adult does, not what she says so if the teacher sits with small groups to discuss the writing, students will see that talk is important and will tend to take the editing more seriously. Finally, peer editing and revision can be done by students of all ability levels, making classes of mixed abilities actually advantageous.

In the November, 1981, English Journal, Joyce Armstrong Carroll concluded that "Talking enables students to (re)discover the creativeness of language,

to verbally reconstruct their reality, to pracitce with expansion, imitation and meaning--all attributes of writing."[3] I heartily agree.

The activities that follow have been collected from a variety of sources, some of which are listed at the end of the three activities pages. Please keep in mind before using them, though, that undirected or misdirected talk can be chaotic. To avoid chaos, plan and sequence talking activities as carefully as you would writing tasks. When students know the purpose of the activities and your reason for including them, they will cooperate. Listen to what the students say about the activities and about their writing. What you learn can help you teach them more.

NOTES

[1]Arthur N. Applebee, Writing in the Secondary School. NCTE Research Report No. 21. (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981), p. 102.

[2]James L. Collins, "Speaking, Writing, and Teaching for Meaning," Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships: Connections and Contrasts, ed. by Barry M. Kroll and Roberta J. Vann. (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981), p. 199.

[3]Joyce Armstrong Carroll, "Talking Through the Writing Process," English Journal, November, 1981, p. 102.

ACTIVITIES

I. Prewriting

Role-play a situation, then have students free-write. Students respond well to problems they might have encountered such as teenage pregnancy. Set the scene, then provide the conflict. "Your best friend has been going out with a lot of guys. One night at a party she got so drunk she says she can't remember what happened but now she has found out she's pregnant. She's afraid to tell her parents, she doesn't know who the father is, and she doesn't believe in abortion. She has come to you for your advice. What do you tell her?" Other, less personal problems, may be used. You know best what your class responds to. After the free-writing period, students may want to develop a persuasive paper offering their advice, a letter replying to the friend, or a dialogue recreating the conversation between friends.

Bring an unusual object to class, discuss it, then have students write. Kevin McHugh of Cincinnati suggested this but I have changed it somewhat. Show the students a suitcase and tell them it was found at the airport. You are going to look inside it to see if there is anything that will identify the owner so you can return it. Inside will be objects that will give clues to the person who "owned" the suitcase such as magazines, toiletries, personal items such as engraved jewelry or pens, clothes, and so on. Discuss each item, encouraging a variety of guesses. Then, ask students to describe the person to whom the case belongs or write an ad that would get that person's attention.

Using just an outline, give a speech explaining how to make or do something. Students often explain to their friends how to change a tire or how to get from one place to another. Channel this natural talking into a prewriting assignment. Explain that chronological order is necessary so they will have to make an outline or a list of the steps but they won't need to write details. Then, each student will get up and explain something to the rest of the class. If you give them an automatic "A" for doing the speech and if you insist that all do it and if you do one first, anxiety will be reduced. The object here is to get them talking, not to grade a speech. This outline can then be turned into a formal process paper if you wish.

Brainstorming words, ideas and topics always helps. Students not only have problems coming up with topics but then they have problems coming up with something to say about them. Discussing the area of the assignment before doing it can help immensely. Depending on the vocabulary levels of your your class, you may want to brainstorm word caches to add variety to their writing. It is generally useful to write words and ideas on the board so students can refer to them during their writing. If the writing is done out of class, of course, students can copy the words from the board to take home.

** Eavesdropping on conversations, listening to records before writing and creating mind pictures for students are a few of the other prewriting activities you can use if you want to increase talking in your class. Inside Out offers detailed examples.

II. Drafting

Collecting dialogues incorporates talking and writing. Students work in pairs to go around the school eavesdropping on conversations. When they return, they write up the best dialogue they heard, making it longer, shorter, funnier, weirder, whatever. Then they read their dialogue to a listener from the class, adding whatever additional information is necessary for the listener to understand it. After that, they rewrite the dialogues including necessary exposition. Finally, the finished product may be performed for the class.

Questinning is an important technique during this stage. As students write, they should try out their piece on a willing listener. This partner can point out where information is insufficient or redundant and may be able to indicate another direction the writer might take. This vocalizes the reflecting process many good writers go through as they compose, trying different words, points of view, directions. If students need to see the importance of asking questions to provide sufficient information, do some of the many feedback exercises which are available. Two of them are here.

Feedback #1: Give each student a different abstract drawing. Instruct them to think about directions they could give to draw this. At this point, ask for a volunteer to come up, turn his back to the class, and describe his drawing. Members of the class are not allowed to ask questions; they must just do their best. This will probably result in much confusion. The second volunteer should come up and describe her drawing. This time, though, the audience is allowed to ask questions. Drawings will probably be fairly similar to the original. Take this opportunity to discuss the importance of asking good, direct questions. Students should then pair up and each should try to describe his drawing to the other so that it can be drawn. In this way, everyone gets practice.

Feedback #2: A day or two in advance, tell students that they will be required to demonstrate some kind of process. Encourage them to choose something with just a few steps such as potting a plant or putting on lipstick. The day of the demonstrations, provide some kind of partition so that the speaker cannot see the listener but the class can see both of them. Then, the process is similar to the one above. The speaker demonstrates and explains while the listener tries to duplicate the process without asking questions. The second time or, with a second pair, the listener may ask questions. Then pairs station themselves around the room and try this simultaneously.

III. Editing or revising

Student-teacher conferences about the writing show that the content is valuable enough to take time to talk about it. Here again teachers should emphasize questioning, not evaluating. Questions such as "How do you feel about this writing?", "Tell me about this incident," or "What problems did you have writing this?" can help the student reflect on the process. In conference, you can also help students expand sections that may not be adequate or help them clarify parts that confuse the reader. Leila Christenbury of James Madison University suggests three types of statements instructors can make during conferences. By asking clarifying questions such as "I am not sure what this passage says. What exactly did you mean by immature?" the instructor shows he is aiming toward clearer communication. By paraphrasing the instructor can report the present level of understanding to the student. Remember to say, "Do you mean all students who disobey their parents are immature?" instead of "What you mean to say is . . ., isn't it?"

The third type of questions instructors use checks perception. By asking, "I get the impression that you did not enjoy writing on this topic. Is that true?" the instructor shows he wants to understand the student as a person.

Peer revision can also be quite successful. There are many approaches to this type of revision, some more structured than others. If the students have no experience in working in groups, you might want to use some of the many available group consensus activities such as "Lost on the Moon" where they must rank order the items most necessary for survival after a spaceship crash on the moon. This kind of activity will get them used to working with each other and listening to other opinions. You might also begin by just carefully spelling out each step of the process before they begin. If students do not have a job to do when they form their groups, chaos will result. Tell the students that they are to choose three of their writings to be read in class. Then, after each person reads, the group will discuss three things--one question about the background or substance of the writing, one thing praiseworthy about the writing and one thing they would change.

After students have some experience in talking supportively and meaningfully about the writing, you may move on to other methods of peer revision. Ken Macrorie suggests "helping circles" where students regularly read aloud their pieces and regularly receive comments from everyone who feels like commenting. Other authors have suggested editorial groups of three where each students serves as, in turn, author, editor and proofreader. Still other teachers have been successful giving students a fill-in type checklist which asks questions like, "List words and phrases that you think are especially good," "What is your overal impression of this piece?" "List words that you think might be misspelled."

The most important part of revision, though, is teacher modeling. Students must see that talking about writing is important and necessary and they will not be convinced unless they see us doing so. Class discussions should occasionally talk about what good writing is. Teachers need to establish the habit of talking with students in small or large groups, too. Since students model what we do, not what we say, they need to see us sitting with small groups and talking. When they see that it is important to us, they will think it is OK, too.

Helpful sources

Kirby, Dan and Tom Liner, Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing. Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1981.

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ABSTRACT

In this speech delivered on April 14 in Seattle, Washington, for the Spring Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Ms. Reid contends that using talking can enhance writing. Research and experience show that too little talking is currently used even though its benefits can be great. She offers a rationale and activities to help secondary teachers incorporate more talking into the writing curriculum.

Louann Reid currently lives in Denver, Colorado where she teaches high school English and forensics. She has taught junior high and high school in Oregon, Washington and Ohio.